

**John Chandler, William Dow, Yann Roblou eds.
*Nostalgies américaines / American Nostalgias :
Littérature, Civilisation, Cinéma.***

Reims : Mallard Éditions, Collection « Angloscopies » dirigée par Max Duperray, 2003. pp. 265, 19 euros.

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- 1 This volume of eleven essays, plus three short introductions by its trio of editors, takes up the question of nostalgia in the American context. The eleven essays are organized in three groups in the following order and quantities: “*Civilisation*” / “Cultural Studies” (5), Literature (Prose, Poetry, Drama), and Cinema (3). In addition to the array of genres chosen for study, the essays range across time periods from colonial America to the nostalgia-soaked politics of the Bush II administration (Chandler). With few exceptions, the essays are well-written and well-argued even if this volume shares with others of its type an annoying lack of proof-reading and rigor when it comes to the uniform presentation of notes (footnotes, endnotes, and body-of-essay-notes all appear at the choice of the essayist it would seem), paragraph formatting, and especially essay length. More regrettable is the lack of any conclusion to the volume, or at the very least a general bibliography that would repeat the reference information for the important general studies on the subject of nostalgia (Davis, Harper, Roux, Siganos, Stewart, etc).
- 2 Had there been a conclusion, it seems to me that it would have needed to insist on two points that emerge very clearly to anyone who reads through all eleven essays. The first is that it is worthwhile to speak of a properly *American* preoccupation with nostalgia even though few of the essayists attempt to spell it out. Reading the title of the volume, one wonders if the adjective “American” will receive a weak motivation (the writers all just happen to work on America and are offering a potluck sharing of their research) or something stronger. Chandler (14), Lagayette (31), and Badt (242) do take stabs at

specifying why nostalgia in the American context is of special interest. Many of the other contributors are certainly enthused to treat an American corpus, whether historical, literary, or cinematographic; but what they are primarily interested in is the mythologizing work of nostalgic discourse, a function that would not seem to be bound to any particular time, place, or person.

- 3 Nevertheless, America—whether one thinks of its vexed relation to those people once called “Indians” whose existence is now memorialized (and repressed) by “nostalgic [“Indian”] place names” that act as consoling epitaphs as Pascale Smorag demonstrates (64-88) or its leading role in the national wilderness conservation movement as Pierre Lagayette shows, or its knack for making nostalgic, feel-good wrappers for various cultural commodities of late capitalism as Lofaro, Kempf, Stokes, and Badt all underline—has been the site of several interesting strands when it comes to the instrumentalization of nostalgia, the recycling or in some cases the invention of a particular past for specific uses in the present. Several of the essayists hit on this nostalgia-as-catalyst pattern and effectively show how, no less than in the case of the European Renaissance, the American Renaissance borrowed from a distant past in order to dynamize the present and the near future—and where necessary overcome psychic wounds that are produced along the way, whether it be survivor’s guilt in the wake of the eradication of Indians, the “small town,” or, one might add, the disappearance of the family farm and the small business. All these observations take off from the linking function of nostalgia, to which may be added oftentimes the vaccination function as Kempf and others point out: “*La nostalgie ... est une douleur symbolique qui protège contre les grands traumatismes sociaux, et leur donne les moyens de les absorber. Elle est une sorte de douleur contrôlée qui permet de regarder l’avenir*” (100). And not just look at the future, but build it, live it, and celebrate it—in part by making use of its difference from the past that will be mourned but let go (until next time) in favor of the new.
- 4 This explains why Robert Sayre’s opening definition of nostalgia—“a felt contrast between a past and a present, to the detriment of the latter” (142)—needs to be supplemented by an understanding of nostalgia’s forward-looking recuperation of the past, a supplement that Sayre and others provide, and this is what gives us the “conflicted nostalgia” that makes the subject so interesting. As Sayre shows in the case of Twain (but the same could be said for Irving, Emerson, Thoreau, Henry and William James, and many other representative Americans), the past is not unambiguously preferred over the present, the “*algia*” or alleged suffering occasioned by a supposed inability to return home (“*nostos*”) is not exactly fake or a mere pose, nor however does it tell the whole story. It is more accurate to say, and this is the second quietly repeated point of this volume, that nostalgia is *death-obsessed*. This does not mean however that it is concerned exclusively with fending off death, overcoming war trauma, or seeking greater vitality wherever it can find it, including from favorable memories of the past.
- 5 Instances of feeling oneself surrounded by war and death and, given this mournful climate, hoping to revive and rejuvenate by means of acts of nostalgia are common enough—and one may note in passing that war (the Civil War or the world wars) is *the* recurring backdrop or decisive reality that structures every one of these eleven studies as well as the introductory remarks of Chandler and Dow. However, as much as one might deploy (or fall into) a nostalgic discourse because of an excess of feeling *too dead* so to speak, one can just as well begin with a sentiment of feeling *too alive* and wax nostalgic about a time when things were thought to be smaller, more controlled, manageable, and

predictable not to say boring, sterile, and, yes, dead. But a “little death,” like a small town that I can visit and then leave in favor of the big city of becoming, is o.k...if only it were possible to get exactly the amount of death one wished for. In this light Jean Kempf’s deliberately short essay in French (only eleven pages but with eleven pages of endnotes) was all the more striking as it is in its own way an example of the “*enkysté*” existence (97) of the small-town that it was writing about—a brilliant byplay tucked away in this volume which, it must be noted, stands as a clear symptom of the coming “glocalization” of English studies in France.

- 6 Chandler usefully reminds us that nostalgia involves “seeing what you want” (118), and this is my point too: when one feels uncomfortable with *being* (with, say, being the oak), one can take refuge in memories of an earlier time (when one was the acorn and still had all that open-ended growing up to do) *and/or* when one feels uncomfortable with *becoming* and the pressure to change, one can long for the stability of a past being (no matter how real, imaginary, or infantile). One of the roles of historians like Chandler is to act as a counter-force laying out counter narratives to check this infinitely plastic use of the past as catalyst, kleenex, scarecrow, or blindfold.
- 7 Self-construction is never far away from self-deception and vice versa (again, see Thoreau on this count or Whitman or George W. Bush) in the various discourses of nostalgia (both sincere and ironic) that creep, march, walk and otherwise move into so many of our ways of world-making.
- 8 I will conclude with one more of the many excellent nuggets in this volume, this one from Johan Callens’s study of Sam Shepard: “In these postmodern days of globalization and mass migration (whether induced by ethnic warfare, ecological, economic or cultural imperatives) homesickness has grown rampant if not permanent, amounting to an orphaning of sorts, pursued and imposed [on millions!]” (191). In other words, you can be sure that in the days, months, and years ahead there will be a nostalgic discourse (or meta-discourse) coming to a theater near you.

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Thèmes : Comptes rendus

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